

## Forget 2016, lawmakers punt McCleary fix to 2017

Elected state leaders have started spending more on schools, but equity issue unresolved

Legislative session that starts Monday may provide only modest progress

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Citizens may have to hope for a comeback in 4th quarter or overtime



State Education Funding Panel members Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, from left; Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center; Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island; and House majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, field questions Thursday in Olympia. **Steve Bloom** Staff file

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Most Seahawks fans will tell you they prefer games when the team takes care of business early and doesn't leave the outcome to chance. This especially holds true during playoff games when so much hangs in the balance.

The same could be said of state leaders tasked with fixing Washington's out-of-whack school-funding machine. Citizens could breathe easier had lawmakers moved with more urgency after the the state Supreme Court issued its landmark McCleary ruling in 2012.

But now, with the clock ticking down to a 2018 deadline to fully fund the K-12 basic education system, there's no victory in sight.

Members of a bipartisan work group appointed by Gov. Jay Inslee have all but punted on winning an agreement during the 2016 legislative session that begins Monday. Even with a \$100,000-a-day court sanction in force, and even with institutionalized pay disparities contributing to a statewide teacher shortage, most leaders at the Capitol Thursday seemed resigned to waiting until next year.

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"2017 is going to be a very tough year for us," said Rep. Chad Magendanz during a session with journalists focused on talking about 2016.

The Issaquah Republican doesn't like what he called "kicking the can" down the road, but that's what legislators would do under a bill the work group filed Friday. It would establish pre-conditions for a final grand bargain and pledge to Supreme Court justices that their order will be satisfied in 2017.

For shorthand purposes, let's call it the "plan before the plan," or better yet, the "kick-the-can plan."

The main thrust of the bill is to dig up data to help solve the big riddle still frustrating school-finance reform — an imbalance in levy collections that allows teachers in rich districts like Bellevue to be paid a lot more than teachers in poor districts like Franklin Pierce. A consultant would crunch compensation data for every district and separate how much is provided by the state and how much by local taxpayers. Then the consultant would make recommendations to a new nine-member state task force to help eliminate school district dependence on local levies.

It's unfortunate that this, like other remedies in the wake of the McCleary edict, has come so late in the game. A provision in the 2015 budget would have required districts to do more accounting and reporting, but Inslee vetoed it in part because legislators didn't provide \$400,000 to fund the mandate.

The work group members correctly laid out the challenges of making headway this year: a complex issue with constitutional and political nuances, a Capitol almost evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, and an off-year session scheduled to last only 60 days. (We would add, though they won't say it, that game-changing, tax-raising laws are rarely passed in election years.)

## **WITH THE CLOCK TICKING DOWN TO A 2018 DEADLINE TO FULLY FUND THE K-12 BASIC EDUCATION SYSTEM, THERE'S NO VICTORY IN SIGHT.**

At least elected leaders have escaped the denial stage. While there was a period of stupefaction after the initial court ruling, they eventually crossed the Rubicon and ramped up school spending the last few years — \$1.3 billion, mostly to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grade and to expand all-day kindergarten.

House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan vowed Thursday that lawmakers will fully comply with McCleary by next year, “because we have to.”

“I can tell you, we will get it done,” the Covington Democrat said.

His words would be more reassuring if the parties could agree this year on a bottom-line number the state needs to spend to fix the system (Democrats have floated at least \$3.5 billion) – or at least a dollar range.

Sure, there can be an exquisite, back-slapping, chest-pounding thrill in waiting to the end, or even going to overtime, to seal a victory; think back to the Seahawks’ epic comeback against the Packers in the NFC Championship game last year.

But lawmakers should also remember two weeks later when the offense had the ball at the goal line near the end of the Super Bowl, and couldn’t put it in the end zone.

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